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Executive Summary of Technical Committee on

CREATING AN AGE INTEGRATED SOCIETY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETAL INSTITUTIONS

NOTE: The recommendations of this document are not recommendations of the 1981 White House Conference on Aging, or the Department of Health and Human Services. This document was prepared for the consideration of the Conference delegates. The delegates will develop their recommendations through the processes of their national meeting in late 1981.

TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

George L. Maddox, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Study of Aging and Human Development
Duke University, NC

Margaret E. Kuhn
National Convenor, Gray Panthers
PA

Lyman M. Tondel, Jr., J.D.
Chair, Commission on the Elderly
American Bar Association, DC

Demetria H. McJulien, Ph.D.
Congressional Black Caucus Brain Trust on Aging
Southern University, LA

Douglas W. Nelson, Director
Wisconsin Bureau of Aging

Tish Sommers, President
Older Women's League
Educational Fund, CA

COMMITTEE STAFF, CONSULTANTS, EXPERTS

Howard Eglit, Consultant, Professor
Chicago-Kent College of Law

Susan C. Slatkin, MPA
White House Conference on Aging Staff

I. INTRODUCTION

The distinctive mission of this committee focused on the social meaning and policy implications of Creating an Age-Integrated Society. Six other committees joined in this task, but they concentrated on particular institutional areas--the economy, educational systems, religious institutions, the family, the media, and governmental structure.

The committee approached its task as follows. The phrase creating an age-integrated society was not taken to imply established consensus about social objectives, about the meaning or desirability of age-integration, or about how a society could most effectively implement age-integration if it chose to do so. The phrase was taken as a useful point of departure for discussing the kind of future society we would like to achieve and the realistic basis for an active, optimistic view of the modifiability of institutionalized ways of responding to human needs and aspirations. The phrase was also taken as a point of departure for discussing how new associations and mutually supportive relationships involving persons of all ages might, if facilitated by public policy, benefits all Americans.

A national policy on aging has two goals. The first is to enhance the lives of older men and women by encouraging their full participation in the life of the nation and by multiplying the benefits of long life. The second is to facilitate positive changes in all our social institutions to accommodate increasing numbers of older persons.

To achieve these goals we strive to build a society in which age discrimination and involuntary age-segregation are ended and in which all age groups share equitably its resources and its responsibilities. Recognizing the changing proportions of young and old, we seek to guard against age divisiveness and to strengthen the mutual supports among generations.

The committee concentrated on conceptual issues, on alternative images of our society, and on illustrating some of the policy implications of these alternative images. We sought commonalities that might bind the generations in shared efforts to reduce segregation and alienation; to enhance choice; to increase opportunities for self-fulfillment; to achieve for older Americans a new status and new involvement in the mainstream of society; and ultimately, to discover older adults as a national resource.

II. HOW THE COMMITTEE PROCEEDED

The committee identified and discussed a number of topics important enough to be discussed by White House Conference participants, reviewed evidence related to these topics, and requested background papers from committee members and a consultant. These papers appear as appendices to the full report of the committee.

The committee took a broad view of the data that were relevant to its tasks. Appropriate attention was given to biological, behavioral, and social scientific evidence on the processes of aging, particularly as it relates to how our society currently deals with older people. But attention was also given to the thoughts of historians, philosophers, ethicists, and jurists. We gave particular attention to reports of the mini-conferences as these conferences assessed the adequacy and implications of evidence when applied to our understanding of particular sub-groups of older people such as women, minorities, and older people in rural areas.

The review of evidence had an intellectually liberating effect on the committee. The varied capacities of older adults of the same chronological age and the changing characteristics of older adults of different ages suggest that becoming old may be a far more complex and amendable process than previously thought. If our inferences are correct, we can in fact realistically discuss alternative futures and a new status for older Americans in our society. The future we prefer and intend will be limited, of course, by the realities of old age but, more importantly, by our ability to achieve political consensus about our social objectives and our ingenuity in implementing those objectives.

III. KEY TOPICS AND FINDINGS

New Understanding of Older Adults

Within the broad category of older adulthood, a large variety of lifestyles, needs, and aspirations that reflect gender, ethnicity, religious preference, and socioeconomic status are

observed. With these variations as a caution against over-generalization, on average, younger older adults retain a high level of functional capacity; and for them, continued social integration into the mainstream of society is a primary concern. Older older adults, in contrast, experience an increased risk of impairment; and for them, services to counteract increased dependence are a major concern.

The Changing Significance of Chronological Age

The first topic has a corollary. Chronological age has progressively lost its utility as a simple basis for understanding the conditions and capabilities of older adults and for developing public policies intended to serve them adequately. Chronological age is, at best, only a gross indicator of capacity, behavior, and need.

A Society in Transition

Americans have progressively lost confidence in outmoded negative stereotypes of older people and of growing older. Negative stereotypes are not only outmoded; they are perceived to be outmoded. Age-ism remains common; but it is increasingly under attack. Changing images of age and attitudes toward old people indicate a society in transition, a society rethinking its values. These are positive and welcomed developments.

Toward an Age-Integrated Society?

Age-integration as an objective of public policy should be--and will be--debated as a key issue in the 1981 White House Conference on Aging. The debate is overdue. National objectives for our aging society have remained very general, largely implicit, and inadequately discussed. There is a growing sense that good intentions have not achieved an adequate quality of life for a large number of older Americans and this failure derives, in part, from the diffuseness of and confusion about our policy objectives. Do we have the social ingenuity and political skill to achieve a society in which a new status for older people will help insure that the needs and aspirations of all our citizens can be appropriately served? The committee answers in the affirmative.

On Scarcity

Although the "graying of our population" is not an explanation of scarce social resources, population aging is often used to illustrate a major societal concern about our capacity to serve all our people adequately. Our society has not developed a clear sense of equity to guide discussions of fairness and reasonable-

ness regarding the distribution of societal resources among persons who are at various points in the life cycle. Advocates of older people and older people themselves will need to give careful attention to how well our current resources are being used to achieve our national objectives as well as to the need for new resources. The leadership of the United States has joined White House Conference leadership in declaring a positive and hopeful view of older people not only as consumers of societal resources but also as a societal resource to be developed.

I". OPTIONS

The committee, concluding that its primary tasks were to explore alternative images for the future of an aging society and to illustrate the implications of these alternatives for public policy, identified three different ways to think of the kind of future society we might prefer:

- o A society in which adulthood is perceived to be indivisible and in which chronological age differences are irrelevant to policy-makers;
- o A society that redefines the social meaning and the boundary of old age; and
- o A society that recognizes older persons as having a special status and special responsibilities.

Image I: Age-Irrelevance

There is increasing evidence and opinion that oldness is, to a large degree, a cultural invention and a bureaucratic convenience that relates in only a crude way to the observed characteristics of very heterogeneous older adults. Age, like race and gender, has been transformed by culture and history into a negative social category that evokes prejudice and discrimination.

The image of an age-irrelevant society offers some clear goals for public policy designed to guide desirable social change. For example, the pursuit of an age-irrelevant society suggests policies stressing

- o the elimination of mandatory retirement;
- o rejection of age-based privilege, exemptions, and special programs;
- o a Federal Council of Age Equity rather than a Federal Council on Aging;

o programs targeted specifically on the problems of needy, impaired older adults.

Image II: Updating the Social Meaning and Boundary of Old Age

Much that we know about older adults and about the conditions of our older population suggests that age-irrelevance appears to be a reasonable goal when older persons between the age of 60 and 75 are considered. For adults 75 years of age and older, the prevalence of poverty, frailty, impairment, and social isolation appears, on average, to be different enough to warrant special consideration. A distinction between young and older older people does not imply that all persons 75 and older are alike; they are not. But, such a distinction may be a reasonable basis for developing and evaluating public policy. For example, redefining the boundary of old age suggests public policies designed to

- o prohibit mandatory retirement prior to age 75;
- o shift the age-based eligibility for full, untested eligibility for income supports and services to an age higher than 65; and
- o target special programs for older people on the very old.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee concluded that neither age-irrelevance nor age-redefinition was as attractive or as useful for developing public policy as a third image of the society that incorporates selected aspects of the first two images. This is the image of veteranship, of old age as a new status characterized by enhanced choice, enhanced authority, and enhanced opportunity for continuing development in the interest of encouraging older adults to remain responsible contributing members of society. For example, veteranship implies a very positive view of age-integration and implies

- o Policies designed to achieve age-equity in the distribution of resources; to enhance freedom of choice to work or retire; to eliminate age discrimination in training, recruitment, and employment; and to promote affirmative action in the interest of responsible social participation of older adults;
- o Policies to assure freedom of associational opportunity, to counter involuntary age segregation in public programs, and to encourage intergenerational contact; and

- o Policies to promote social roles that enhance respect for older people and a new status that includes responsibility to contribute to society as well as rights.

Veteranship is a pragmatic prescription for social policy that reflects the ultimate interests of both the young and the old. A new and special status for elders provides a proper basis for broad-based advocacy in behalf of social policies and programs that respond to the heterogeneity of interests, skills, needs and wants that are found among older Americans. This new concept may reconcile and legitimate a broad range of programs that presently appear to be disparate and inconsistent. For these reasons, we find veteranship as an attractive image of the future society to be pursued. By enhancing choice, promoting a new and special status emphasizing entitlement, and creating opportunities for responsible social involvement of older adults, veteranship conceptualizes late life not as inevitable decline but as liberation and fruition in the later years of life.

Some will object, we know, that conferring a special status on elders will have little practical value. They will perceive veteranship and its equating of age with achievement as, at best, a convenient but insubstational rationale. We disagree. Such an objection assumes that living does not really teach; that enduring does not really involve courage, social contribution, and sacrifice; and that surviving is somehow a passive and automatic process. The innocence of such assumptions can be excused only for the very young.

The Committee, with full awareness of the dilemmas for social policy posed by any image of the future society we prefer, affirms that veteranship is a useful perspective from which to develop public policy in the decade ahead.

The following Technical Committee Summaries have been published:

Retirement Income
Health Maintenance and Health Promotion
Health Services
Social and Health Aspects of Long Term Care
Family, Social Services and Other Support Systems
The Physical and Social Environment and Quality of Life
Older Americans as A Growing National Resource
Employment
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for Societal Institutions
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for the Economy
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for the Educational Systems
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for Spiritual Well-Being
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for the Family
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for the Media
Creating an Age Integrated Society: Implications for Governmental Structures
Research in Aging

Experts from various fields were appointed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services to serve on 16 Technical Committees, each charged with developing issues and recommendations in a particular area for consideration as background material for the delegates to the 1981 White House Conference on Aging.